THE TOILING OF FELIX

HENRY
VAN DYKE

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The Toiling of Felix

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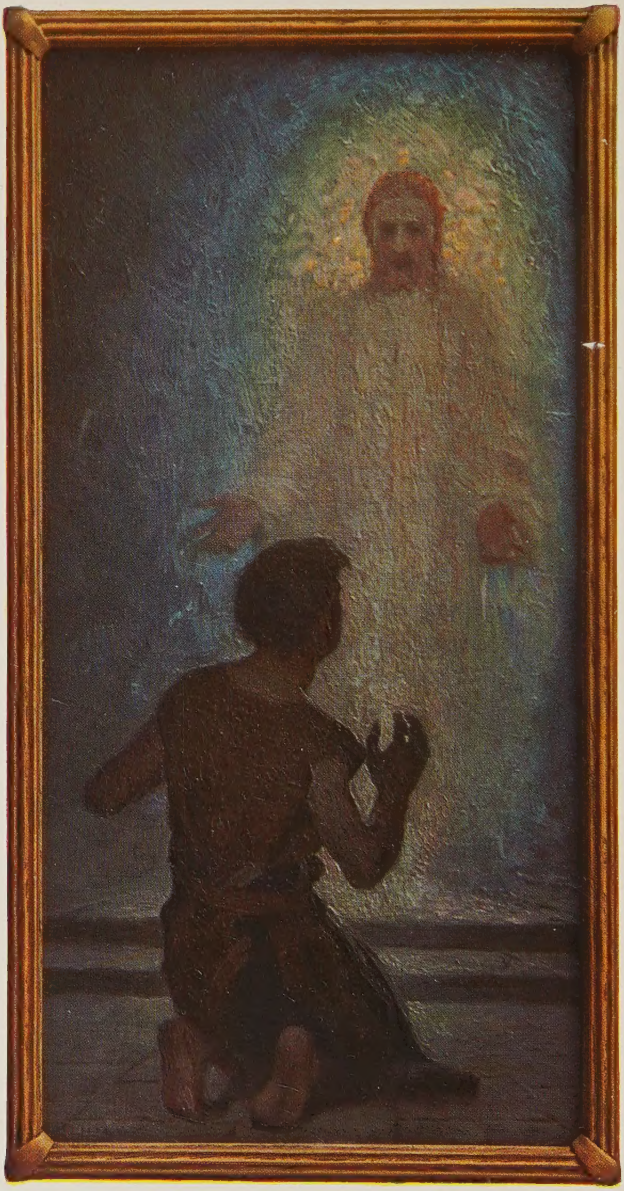

THE TOILING OF FELIX

BY

HENRY VAN DYKE

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IN the rubbish heaps of the ancient city of Oxyrhynchus, near the River Nile, a party of English explorers, in the winter of 1897, discovered a fragment of a papyrus book, written in the second or third century, and hitherto unknown. This single leaf contained parts of seven short sentences of Christ, each introduced by the words, "Jesus says." It is to the fifth of these Sayings of Jesus that the following poem refers.

PRELUDE

HEAR a word that Jesus spake
Eighteen hundred years ago,
Where the crimson lilies blow
Round the blue Tiberian lake:
There the bread of life He brake,
Through the fields of harvest walking
With His lowly comrades, talking
Of the secret thoughts that feed
Weary souls in time of need.
Art thou hungry? Come and take;
Hear the word that Jesus spake!
'Tis the sacrament of labour, bread and wine divinely blest;
Friendship's food and sweet refreshment, strength and courage, joy and rest.

BUT this word the Master said
Long ago and far away,
Silent and forgotten lay
Buried with the silent dead,
Where the sands of Egypt spread
Sea-like, tawny billows heaping
Over ancient cities sleeping,
While the River Nile between
Rolled its summer flood of green
Rolled its autumn flood of red:
There the word the Master said,
Written on a frail papyrus, wrinkled,
scorched by fire, and torn,
Hidden in God's hand was waiting
for its resurrection morn.

NOW at last the buried word
By the delving spade is found,
Sleeping in the quiet ground.
Now the call of life is heard:
Rise again, and like a bird,
Fly abroad on wings of gladness
Through the darkness and the sadness,
Of the toiling age, and sing
Sweeter than the voice of Spring,
Till the hearts of men are stirred
By the music of the word,—
Gospel for the heavy-laden, answer to the labourer's cry:
"Raise the stone, and thou shalt find me; cleave the wood and there am I."

LEGEND

BROTHER-MEN who look for Jesus,
long to see Him close and clear,
Hearken to the tale of Felix, how he
found the Master near.

Born in Egypt, 'neath the shadow of the
crumbling gods of night,
He forsook the ancient darkness, turned
his young heart toward the Light.

SEEKING CHRIST, in vain he
waited for the vision of the Lord;
Vainly pondered many volumes where
the creeds of men were stored;

Vainly shut himself in silence, keeping
vigil night and day;
Vainly haunted shrines and churches
where the Christians came to pray.

ONE BY ONE he dropped the
duties of the common life of care,
Broke the human ties that bound him,
laid his spirit waste and bare,

Hoping that the Lord would enter that
deserted dwelling-place,
And reward the loss of all things with
the vision of His face.

SEEKING CHRIST, in vain he
waited for the vision of the Lord;
Vainly pondered many volumes where
the creeds of men were stored;

STILL THE BLESSED vision tarried; still the light was unrevealed;
Still the Master, dim and distant, kept
His countenance concealed.

Fainter grew the hope of finding, wearier
grew the fruitless quest;
Prayer and penitence and fasting gave
no comfort, brought no rest.

LINGERING in the darkened temple,
ere the lamp of faith went out,
Felix knelt before the altar, lonely, sad,
and full of doubt.

"Hear me, O thou mighty Master,"
from the altar-step he cried,
"Let my one desire be granted, let my
hope be satisfied!

"ONLY ONCE I long to see Thee,
in the fulness of Thy grace:
Break the clouds that now enfold Thee
with the sunrise of Thy face!

"All that men desire and treasure have
I counted loss for Thee;
Every hope have I forsaken, save this
one, my Lord to see.

"LOOSED the sacred bands of friendship, solitary stands my heart;
Thou shalt be my sole companion when
I see Thee as Thou art.

"From Thy distant throne in glory, flash
upon my inward sight,
Fill the midnight of my spirit with the
splendour of Thy light.

"ALL THINE other gifts and blessings, common mercies, I disown;
Separated from my brothers, I would see
Thy face alone.

"I have watched and I have waited as one watcheth for the morn:
Still the veil is never lifted, still Thou leavest me forlorn.

"NOW I SEEK THEE in the
desert, where the holy hermits
dwell;
There, beside the saint Serapion, I will
find a lonely cell.

"There at last Thou wilt be gracious;
there Thy presence, long-concealed,
In the solitude and silence to my heart
shall stand revealed.

"THOU WILT COME, at dawn
or twilight, o'er the rolling waves
of sand;
I shall see Thee close beside me, I shall
touch Thy piercèd hand.

"Lo, Thy pilgrim kneels before Thee;
bless my journey with a word;
Tell me now that if I follow I shall find
Thee, O my Lord!"

FELIX LISTENED: through the
darkness, like a murmur of the wind,
Came a gentle sound of stillness: "Never
faint, and thou shalt find."

Long and toilsome was his journey
through the heavy land of heat,
Egypt's blazing sun above him, blistering
sand beneath his feet.

PATIENTLY he plodded onward,
from the pathway never erred,
Till he reached the river-fastness called
the Mountain of the Bird.

There the tribes of air assemble, once a
year, their noisy flock,
Then, departing, leave their sentinel
perched upon the highest rock.

FAR AWAY, on joyful pinions,
over land and sea they fly;
But the watcher on the summit lonely
stands against the sky.

There the eremite Serapion in a cave
had made his bed;
There the faithful bands of pilgrims sought
his blessing, brought him bread.

MONTH BY MONTH, in deep seclusion, hidden in the rocky cleft,
Dwelt the hermit, fasting, praying; once a year the cave he left.

On that day a happy pilgrim, chosen out of all the band,
Won a special sign of favour from the holy hermit's hand.

UNDERNEATH the narrow window, at the doorway closely sealed,
While the afterglow of sunset deepened round him, Felix kneeled.

"Man of God, of men most holy, thou whose gifts cannot be priced!
Grant me thy most precious guerdon; tell me how to find the Christ."

BREATHLESS, Felix bowed and
listened, but no answering voice he
heard;
Darkness folded, dumb and deathlike,
round the Mountain of the Bird.

Then he said, "The saint is silent; he
would teach my soul to wait:
I will tarry here in patience, like a beggar
at his gate."

NEAR THE DWELLING of the
hermit Felix found a rude abode
In a shallow tomb deserted, close beside
the pilgrim-road.

So the faithful pilgrims saw him waiting
there without complaint,—
Soon they learned to call him holy, fed
him as they fed the saint.

DAY BY DAY he watched the
sunrise flood the distant plain with
gold,
While the River Nile beneath him,
silvery coiling, seaward rolled.

Night by night he saw the planets range
their glittering court on high,
Saw the moon, with queenly motion,
mount her throne and rule the sky.

MORN ADVANCED and midnight fled, in visionary pomp attired;
Never morn and never midnight brought the vision long-desired.

Now at last the day is dawning when Serapion makes his gift;
Felix kneels before the threshold, hardly dares his eyes to lift.

NOW the cavern door uncloses, now
the saint above him stands,
Blesses him without a word, and leaves
a token in his hands.

'Tis the guerdon of thy waiting! Look,
thou happy pilgrim, look!
Nothing but a tattered fragment of an
old papyrus book.

MORN ADVANCED and mid-
night fled, in visionary pomp
attired;
Never morn and never midnight brought
the vision long-desired.

READ! perchance the clue to guide
thee hidden in the words may lie:
"Raise the stone, and thou shalt find me;
cleave the wood, and there am I."

Can it be the mighty Master spake such
simple words as these?
Can it be that men must seek Him at
their toil 'mid rocks and trees?

DISAPPOINTED, heavy-hearted,
from the Mountain of the Bird
Felix mournfully descended, questioning
the Master's word.

Not for him a sacred dwelling, far above
the haunts of men:
He must turn his footsteps backward to
the common life again.

FROM A QUARRY near the river,
hollowed out below the hills,
Rose the clattering voice of labour,
clanking hammers, clinking drills.

Dust, and noise, and hot confusion made
a Babel of the spot:
There, among the lowliest workers, Felix
sought and found his lot.

NOW he swung the ponderous mallet,
smote the iron in the rock—
Muscles quivering, tingling, throbbing—
blow on blow and shock on shock;

Now he drove the willow wedges, wet
them till they swelled and split,
With their silent strength, the fragment,
sent it thundering down the pit.

NOW the groaning tackle raised it;
now the rollers made it slide;
Harnessed men, like beasts of burden,
drew it to the river-side.

Now the palm-trees must be riven, massive timbers hewn and dressed;
Rafts to bear the stones in safety on the rushing river's breast.

AXE AND AUGER, saw and
chisel, wrought the will of man in
wood:
'Mid the many-handed labour Felix
toiled, and found it good.

Every day the blood ran fleeter through
his limbs and round his heart;
Every night he slept the sweeter, know-
ing he had done his part.

DREAMS of solitary saintship faded
from him; but, instead,
Came a sense of daily comfort in the toil
for daily bread.

Far away, across the river, gleamed the
white walls of the town
Whither all the stones and timbers day
by day were drifted down.

DREAMS of solitary saintship
faded from him; but, instead,
Came a sense of daily comfort in the
toil for daily bread.

THERE THE WORKMAN saw
his labour taking form and bearing
fruit,
Like a tree with splendid branches
rising from a humble root.

Looking at the distant city, temples,
houses, domes, and towers,
Felix cried in exultation: "All the
mighty work is ours.

"EVERY MASON in the quarry,
every builder on the shore,
Every chopper in the palm-grove, every
raftsman at the oar,

"Hewing wood and drawing water,
splitting stones and cleaving sod,
All the dusty ranks of labour, in the
regiment of God,

"MARCH TOGETHER toward
His triumph, do the task His
hands prepare:
Honest toil is holy service; faithful work
is praise and prayer."

While he bore the heat and burden
Felix felt the sense of rest
Flowing softly like a fountain, deep
within his weary breast;

FELT the brotherhood of labour,
rising round him like a tide,
Overflow his heart and join him to the
workers at his side.

Oft he cheered them with his singing at
the breaking of the light,
Told them tales of Christ at noonday,
taught them words of prayer at night.

ONCE he bent above a comrade
fainting in the mid-day heat,
Sheltered him with woven palm-leaves,
gave him water, cool and sweet.

Then it seemed, for one swift moment,
secret radiance filled the place;
Underneath the green palm-branches
flashed a look of Jesus' face.

ONCE AGAIN, a raftsman, slipping, plunged beneath the stream and sank;
Swiftly Felix leaped to rescue, caught him, drew him toward the bank—

Battling with the cruel river, using all his strength to save—
Did he dream? or was there One beside him walking on the wave?

NOW AT LAST the work was ended, grove deserted, quarry stilled;
Felix journeyed to the city that his hands had helped to build.

In the darkness of the temple, at the closing hour of day,
As of old he sought the altar, as of old he knelt to pray:

"HEAR ME, O Thou hidden Master! Thou hast sent a word to me;
It is written—Thy commandment—I have kept it faithfully.

"Thou hast bid me leave the visions of the solitary life,
Bear my part in human labour, take my share in human strife.

"I HAVE done Thy bidding Master;
raised the rock and felled the tree,
Swung the axe and plied the hammer,
working every day for Thee.

"Once it seemed I saw Thy presence
through the bending palm-leaves
gleam;
Once upon the flowing water—Nay, I
know not, 'twas a dream!

"THIS I KNOW: Thou hast been
near me: more than this I dare not
ask.
Though I see Thee not, I love Thee.
Let me do Thy humblest task!"

Through the dimness of the temple slowly
dawned a mystic light;
There the Master stood in glory,
manifest to mortal sight:

HANDS that bore the mark of
labour, brow that bore the print of
care;
Hands of power, divinely tender; brow
of light, divinely fair.

"Hearken, good and faithful servant,
true disciple, loyal friend!
Thou hast followed me and found me;
I will keep thee to the end.

"WELL I KNOW thy toil and trouble; often weary, fainting, worn,
I have lived the life of labour, heavy burdens I have borne.

"Never in a prince's palace have I slept on golden bed,
Never in a hermit's cavern have I eaten unearned bread.

"BORN WITHIN a lowly stable,
where the cattle round me stood,
Trained a carpenter in Nazareth, I have
toiled, and found it good.

"They who tread the path of labour
follow where my feet have trod;
They who work without complaining
do the holy will of God.

"WHERE the many toil together,
there am I among my own;
Where the tired workman sleepeth,
there am I with him alone.

"I, the peace that passeth knowledge,
dwell amid the daily strife;
I, the bread of heaven, am broken in
the sacrament of life.

"EVERY TASK, however simple,
sets the soul that does it free;
Every deed of love and mercy, done to
man, is done to me.

"Thou hast learned the open secret;
thou hast come to me for rest;
With thy burden, in thy labour, thou
art Felix, doubly blest.

"NEVERMORE thou needest seek me; I am with thee everywhere;
Raise the stone, and thou shalt find me;
cleave the wood, and I am there."

ENVOY

THE LEGEND of Felix is ended,
the toiling of Felix is done;
The Master has paid him his wages,
the goal of his journey is won;

He rests, but he never is idle; a thousand years pass like a day,
In the glad surprise of the Paradise
where work is sweeter than play.

YET OFTEN the King of that country comes out from his tireless host,
And walks in this world of the weary as if He loved it the most;

For here in the dusty confusion, with eyes that are heavy and dim,
He meets again the labouring men who are looking and longing for Him.

HE CANCELS the curse of Eden,
and brings them a blessing instead:
Blessed are they that labour, for Jesus
partakes of their bread.

He puts His hand to their burdens,
He enters their homes at night:
Who does his best shall have as a guest
the Master of life and light.

AND COURAGE will come with
His presence, and patience return
at His touch,
And manifold sins be forgiven to those
who love Him much;

The cries of envy and anger will change
to the songs of cheer,
The toiling age will forget its rage when
the Prince of Peace draws near.

THIS is the gospel of labour, ring it,
ye bells of the kirk!
The Lord of Love came down from
above, to live with the men who
work.

This is the rose that He planted, here
in the thorn-curst soil:
Heaven is blest with perfect rest, but
the blessing of Earth is toil.

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